



Man Down Under

Colin Heston



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by

Colin Heston



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Man Down Under

Today I'm fifteen and I'm gunna get laid tonight. I'm in the paddock behind the pub. The back fence leans right over like it's gunna fall on me. It stinks of piss-n-beer. It's getting dark and there's a red glow all over the paddocks. Gees, I like this time of day in summer. The grass is all black and crunchy cos it's been burnt off. I squat, trying to hide among the big scotch thistles — bastards-a-things — without getting pricked. I'm in me best clothes, white sports coat, navy pants, blue suede shoes. Hair slicked back. Me arse grazes a rough rock as I drop down. The flask of gin slips out-a me pocket and clanks on a rock. It's the one I stole last night.

It's dark. The cops is cruise-n up and down, sitting in their car like hookers in a window. They shine a spotlight and it hits the old pub fence. I freeze, scared shitless, not of the cops, but me old man if he found out. Got no idea why they're cruising round here. The pub's been closed for over three hours. All the drunks is well gone. The spotlight strays by me hand that's gripping a rock to keep me steady. I stop breathing as though they could hear me. It's the Preacher, I think to meself. Then suddenly it's really dark. The cop car drifts away. I struggle to stand up, me hand slips off the rock, and I fall back into the bloody thistles. I roll over on to me elbow. The burnt grass crunches under me weight, and I have black all over the sleeve of me white sports coat. Shit-head cops! I take a swig of the gin. I have to force myself to get it down. How anyone can drink this bloody stuff, I dunno. But I'm gunna make meself do it. And then I'm gunna get a shag tonight no matter what.

*

This crazy bitch, she says she's fourteen. I'd say she was thirteen at the very most. She comes up to me out-a nowhere just as I round the corner on Lester street. The church hall's lit up and the rest of me gang's hanging round the door.

"Go-n to the flics?" she says.

It's Iris. I can barely make her out in the dark. She comes up real close, nose graze-n me cheek.

"Dunno. What's on?"

"Dunno."

There's hardly anything of her, skinny as a rake, only a little bulge at her breast, but a soft face, pale in the dark. She pushes her lips up to me ear. I imagine they're full, lush, like the Japanese rose that was me Mum's favorite.

"Let's go anyway," she whispers.

Blood rushes to me cheeks and elsewhere.

"Yair, orlright."

I stick me arm round her waist and plant a kiss right where I think her lips are. She's on to me. We kiss like buggery. It's like kissing a serpent with a beautiful soft face. Her lips is wet and slippery. I'm half out-a me mind.

The movies have started. We get to the church hall door and we stop by the mums selling the tickets and the lollies. I buy a box-a Jaffas. One-a the mothers looks at me with a "I know what you're up to" look. I say "Thank you Mrs. Lester," and take me change. We head straight for the middle of the fourth row from the back. That way, the sticky-beaks can't see us. The Movietone news is still running. I see the Beatles getting off a plane somewhere in America. Then we're into it.

She's got a hold-a-me. I pull back. Don't wanna mess me underpants.

"Wanna swig?" I ask. I slide me bottle-a gin out-a me pocket.

"Nah, hate the stuff. What is it?"

"Gin."

The movie's half way through. The lights go on while some kid's father puts on the second reel. We start eating our Jaffas. Iris drops one and it bounces like a ping-pong ball on the wooden floor. Me mates look back to find me, grinning. They see I'm busy.

*

That was two years ago. Now I'm here with me Dad holding his hand and trying to keep him going, yabbering to him. Saying whatever comes into me head. His hand's all rough and there's a big bump where he broke it punching his old man in the jaw, a story he loved to tell when he had a few grogs in. Now it's limp. He's breathing in bits-n-pieces. His face is all bloated and dark purple like the cheap plonk he's been drinking. He's in a coma. They say he's dying.

It's six in the morning and I'm s'posed to be getting ready for school. I'm the only one left with him in the house. Mum took off a couple-a years ago. She was fed up with his drinking, she said. I can't blame her. But I didn't go. I liked me life here cos I could do anything I wanted and nobody cared.

Gees, this isn't fun though. Watch-n me Dad die. They want me to blame him for it, I know they do. The way the do-gooders look at him and me. They think he's disgusting, and me — gees I dunno — to them I'm a poor little shit that's gotta be saved from his Dad. They try to stroke me hair or hold me. I push them away. They should mind their own

bloody business. The old pub was me Dad's life. Who could blame him for that? So the booze is killing him. So what? It was his life and still is his life. He had a great life full-a fun, I'd say. I could tell you a bunch-a stories. Maybe he's listening to me now. I hope so. They should know about his life, I mean what fun he had and what good mates he's got. Cut short by the booze — yair. But anyone's life can be cut short, even mine, can't it? Gees, I've nearly been killed a couple-a times just crossing the Melb-n Road.

*

The pub was Dad's life, so I'm trying to remember everything that I've seen and heard. The old pub's just across the road from our Commission house where I'm sitting with me Dad in the sleep-out. Me mind's put-n pictures in me head; the old pub's rusted iron roof, the brick walls, painted a sickly cream that's flake-n away. I get up and go to the front room and look out across the road. I never looked at the pub like this before. I see the rusted gutters clinging to the veranda and I even notice the cracked concrete path that's under it. I pull the curtain back and see the pub's big window with LADIES LOUNGE painted on it in fancy gold letters, the tall chimneys, magpies perched on the electric wires above, big white spots beneath. They say the pub won't be there in a year or two. What will I do then? I'm only seventeen, you know. I'm still at high school. Me last year's about done. Me mates think I'm crazy. They all got jobs couple-a years ago. Me Dad always said I gotta get a good education. So I'm gunna go to Teachers College next year. I'll have lots-a money. The Education Department will pay me. Pretty good wicket, me Dad said. I feel his hand twitch in mine. His chest rises. He even licks his lips.

*

They call the old pub the "blood house" but its official name is the Corio Shire Hotel, and I love the place. There's

bloody fights on the street outside every Friday and Saturday night. Only fist fights though. There's rules. No knives. No broken glasses. If ever that happens, the blokes grab the bastard and let the other bloke pummel him.

Me Dad was easily the pub's best customer and he never liked me hanging round the place, but I did odd jobs for Mr. Counter, the publican. I ran errands, learned how to joke with the customers, and on race days carried bets to the back-a-the-pub behind the fence and placed them with Skeeter the bookie. I made some good dough, specially if I carried a bet that paid well. And Skeeter paid me as his spotter. I only had to tip him off a couple-a times though. Mr. Counter had a deal with the cops. There's a lot I could tell about that, but I better not.

Dad had his reserved spot in the corner of what was called the "old bar" of the pub. He'd go on and on about how the old stone walls was a hundred years old or something. And he'd say how much better it was than the new bar that was built next to it a few years ago showing off its u-shaped counter, with lots of space and fancy beer taps. The old bar was always crowded shoulder to shoulder. Dad liked it. Reckoned he felt close to his mates that way. And it was where most of the brawls broke out when a bloke's elbow spilled another bloke's beer. That's all it took. Mr. Counter's bouncer, Grecko the boxer, wouldn't stop the brawl. He'd just gather them all up and push-em out to the street. And all the blokes would cheer them on.

Like I said, Dad didn't like me being there. But I kept out-a his way cos he looked kind of embarrassed when he saw me. And I didn't wanna do that to him. And later, when things were not so good, he was happy to borrow a few bob from me.

*

I was thirteen when we moved into the Commission house. I took the bus to school in Geelong every morning and it dropped me off at five o'clock every day in front of the pub. The first time I got off there, I was really scared. The tipsy blokes would come up to me and start chatter-n away about nuthin. You couldn't be sure whether they was friendly or gunna bloody hit you. And they'd breathe their fumes right in me face, grab me by the shirt collar or me loose tie just as I was trying to cross the road. And the road was the bloody Melbourne Road, a big strip of concrete with cars speeding up and down it all the time.

It took a few weeks before I was game enough to go into the pub and have a look in. And when I did. Gees, bloody hell! The first thing that hit me was the smell of stale beer and vomit. Enough to turn anybody off the booze for bloody life! Then I made the mistake of put-n me finger on the window ledge and it almost bloody stuck there cos it was where the mob left their sticky glasses when they drank outside. Next I put me foot on the worn bluestone step at the old bar entrance, and I remember feeling the greasy striped canvas in the doorway rubbing me cheek. It was too much! I turned and ran home.

The next day, though, I was back. This time I stepped past the old canvas and put me foot on the step up to the bar. And before I knew it I'd slipped on the slime and called out "shit!" and all the blokes in the bar laughed at me. I put me hand down to push myself up, and it slipped on the muck of spittle. The blokes just loved that.

"Serves you bloody right!"

"You shouldn't be in 'ere young fella!"

"Get the buggery out!"

I wiped me hand on me pants.

"Hey, why'ncha lick it orff!"

I ran out straight across the road and nearly got run over. But the next day I was back and once more put me foot down on the old bluestone step. It was about five o'clock. I heard the siren at the Fords factory. There'd soon be a crowd of blokes crossing the road and filling up the bar. I turned and saw them come-n at me. I jumped aside and decided to come back tomorrow, a Saturday, not a school day. I'd see it all close up. I had often looked out through our dining room window and watched the brawls outside the pub. It was better than anything on TV, which we didn't have anyway.

*

Me Mum (she was still home then) made me eat a German sausage sandwich with lots-a butter. I loved those sandwiches, but all I could think of was getting across the road to see what was going on in the pub. I chomped down the sandwich and left and I heard me Mum call out where was I going, but I was gone.

It was well after five and a hot night. The pub was packed, and it was hard to work me way through the big crowd outside. Being small, I slipped through the gaps between drink-n schools and made it through the old bar entrance.

Gees, I tellya. The blood rushed to me face. I came out in a hot sweat, and I had to cover me ears cos the din of the blokes yelling to each other was so loud. A bloke grabbed me by me arm.

"Watcha bloody doin' in 'ere?" he said with a big grin. He was a red-faced bloke dressed in oily overalls. I was scared shitless and couldn't talk. He didn't wait for me to answer. "You better be careful where you put-cha foot, fella. The cellar's below us. Floorboards are rotten. Last week a bloke broke his leg and a lot more right where yer stand-n." He

looked down at me, serious. "Yair, slipped right through up to his balls and that was it!"

I turned to leave but couldn't see the doorway, caught glimpses of the windows and the iron bars that stop drunks from falling through. I felt like I was in jail. No matter which way I turned there was walls of hot sweaty bodies. I ended up crawling along the filthy floor until I ran into a stool against the bar counter.

A hand reached down and grabbed me by the ear and pulled me up. It was me Dad. Remember that, Dad? And you know what you did? You grabbed me by the scruff-a-the-neck and shoved me through the crowd and growled, "Get back bloody home and don't let me see you here again!" We got to the bar entrance, you pulled back the canvas curtain and you gave me a push and I ran straight across the road, not even look-n. A car screeched as it swerved to miss me. I was nearly run over, Dad! You must remember that. Nearly killed by me own father! Nar, Dad. Don't worry about it. I'm only joke-n with yer.

I'm squeezing the old man's hand. His knuckles is white, his fingers thin and bony. I lean over and look into his puffy face. His eyes are three quarters closed, but there's a flicker, I reckon. Me nose is nearly touching his. It's OK Dad. You did a good job. Look at me. Going to Teachers' College next year. Just what you wanted, right? The Victorian Education department will pay for it all. Pretty good deal, you always said, didn'tcha?

*

I've been moping round the house, stretch-n me legs, talking to meself all this time, walking round and round. It's kind of easier talking to meself than trying to talk to Dad, cos I dunno what he hears and I don't wanna upset him.

Dunno if he's thinking inside his head. Dunno what's going on in there.

"You silly old bastard, look what you've done to yerself," I say. I sit in the old lounge chair beside his cot and grasp his hand in both mine. Shit, yer drink-n yerself to death all your mates say. I'll give you another glass of plonk if you wake up.

You know who I saw yesterday? Chooka the chunderer, 'memba him? I was on this bottle drive, collecting beer bottles for the church. We went to his house. I didn't know it was his till I goes round the back. There's a huge pile of empties stacked against the fence. A great find! And then I look across to the back door and he's sitting on the step. I goes over to say hello. I couldn't believe it was him. You know how funny he is. What a lot of laughs we had in the old bar with him. I tellya Dad, I never saw such a sorry sight in me life. His eyes was all big and puffy and watery and red rimmed. He looked so sad. I mean, really miserable, like he was waiting for someone to come along and strangle him or something. Poor bugger. Wonder why? He was in the bar yesterday. Just his funny old self. He looked at me. I pretended I never saw him this time. I don't get it Dad. Why would someone be so funny in one place and so sad in another? By the way. He cadged a bob off me. I couldn't say no while we was take-n all his bottles away, you know. Some little kid wanted to come with us. We couldn't let him of course. Must-a been Chooka's kid? He didn't say nuthin. I thought he was gunna cry. A grown man, for heaven's sake! Whatcha think Dad?"

*

Mum wouldn't go to the pub. I used to think it was because of Dad, but he said it was because she reckoned the pub was a disgusting place. I dunno. You get used to it. Like I said, the first time I walked into the bar, I was hit by the

smell of stale beer and sweat and I couldn't believe how strong it was. But now I don't even notice it. Course, I'm not talking about the mens' dunny. If Mum had-a seen it, she'd-a wanted to move to a bloody house a mile away! To get to the toilet you had to go all the way round the side of the pub behind the back fence. And there was this little-house painted dull red. And the fence was eaten away at the bottom, and it dripped with green slime where the blokes that couldn't wait let go. Gees. I never went there unless it was a real emergency. I'd run home. Once, Mr. Counter gave me the job to clean off the stuff wrote all over the walls. I said I'd do it, but I never did. I read them all though. They was nuthin special, same as the ones at me school. You know, "Here I sit broken hearted..." and "You don't have to kangaroo this seat..."

*

Dad's coughing a bit. His eyes is kind-a half closed. I gotta keep talking to him to keep him going. I'm starting to say the same stuff over and over.

Dad, didja know I once sneaked in the pub after hours? Found an open window in one of the guest rooms and climbed through. I told Mum I was at C of E boys club. A couple-a years ago I s'pose it was. Gees. It was creepy. But you know what? I no sooner got in and I heard voices, loud voices and laughing and I peeked down the passage and y'know what? There was cops there, booze-n. Would-ya believe it? Well-a course ya do, you used-ta drink with them, I know now. Anyways, I got back out. I wasn't scared. I had to pee. I wanted to go bad, and I knew there was one down the passage, but I wasn't game to go there. And to get to the shit-house out back — you must-a done it a thousand times, Dad — to get there you had to walk down the side of the pub past the old cypress tree. And as soon as I got that far, I knew it was close cos of the stink! Dad, I dunno how you put

up with it! It just stunk so awful, and everything round it and inside was all green and slimy. I stood up to the urinal, aimed high, but I couldn't go! It was awful! Thank goodness it was after hours and there was nobody there! I turned and ran back out. Forgot to button meself up even. I got to the cypress tree and there's a bloke there, drunk as a nut piss-n full bore right under the tree, which happens to be right outside the pub kitchen. The cook, she's yelling at him and bang-n on the window. He turns full on to her and says, "Sorry missus, didn't know yer wanted to see the bloody lot." I jumped the fence and ran across the road and got home just in time. Nearly pissed me pants! "

There's a little twitch at the corner of Dad's mouth. I'm sure he's trying to smile.

*

I'm in the bar, doing me job collecting empty glasses. I catch me foot in the lino that's worn through and turned up at the ends. I bang into a bloke's elbow and spill his beer. I'm scared shitless. Me face is red as beetroot.

"Gees. Sorry mate!" I says. "Here, let me shout you another one."

I don't have the money but I know if I don't make the offer I'll get bashed up. He's a big brawny bloke with bare arms, bulging muscles, red tanned skin and wearing wunna those white singlets. He's looking down at me. I'm stare-n up at his lips, waiting for the abuse. I squeeze me way past his mates and make it to the bar. The barman looks down at me. He knows I'm in a spot. I shove the empties over to him, and push one forward and say in a squeaky voice, "Can you fill this one?" And I nod towards the bloke. The barman, a good bloke if ever there was one, puts up two new glasses and fills-em and pushes them across. The bloke pushes them back and gives me a fierce look. I'm done for, I reckon. He

grabs me arm and I wince. Then just as quick, he lets go and roars laughing and his mates join in. He pats me on the head and says, "Didn't I see you down in the old Clarington pub?" I see me Dad out of the corner of me eye. He's staring straight ahead. Hope he's not listening.

"Me? Nar, never been there," I lie. I was there alright. It's the pub just across from the Geelong footy oval. He's lost interest though. He grabs his two free beers and he and his mates get down to it. I slink away. Me Dad never said nuthin.

*

Dad's wheezing now. I let go his hand. I'm dreaming like I reckon he is. I'm in the bar parlour, muck-n round make-n like I'm picking up empties, wipe-n up the slops.

"Whiskey pleeeese," asks this bloke putting on a lot of side. He pushes his chin out to draw attention to his collar and tie, an office worker at the Ford factory across the road, I betcha. He opens his newspaper that's tucked under his arm like they all do. There's a big headline, *The Herald* I think it is, that says something about Menzies and the Indonesians come-n to get us. This bloke, he reads it like it's real serious. Course, the barman hasn't poured his whiskey, waits till the bloke asks again, then pours him a Corio, locally distilled at the plant right next to the phosphate company down the road. Cheaper than Scotch.

"My word, you're busy tonight," says the bloke, talking like the Queen would-a said it, "you certainly have to work fast in the last hour before six."

"Yair."

"Yes, quite a place you have here, you—"

"Look mate," says the barman, "put your bloody money down will-yer? There's other blokes in this bloody pub besides you!"

"Oh! Well if that's the way you feel—"

The barman grabs the money, rings it up and slams the bloke's change down in front of him.

"Keep the change," the bloke says. The way he talks, I'm sure he's a bloody pommie.

The barman gives him a rotten look and pushes the small change away. "Stuff you," he says and moves away to another customer. Another bloke comes up and taps him on the shoulder.

"Yer a bloody pommie aren'tcha?" he says and doesn't wait for an answer, "I've been bloody drink-n in this bloody pub for fifteen years, so don'tcha start moan-n about it or the mob of us here will knock yer bloody block orf. Alwees be careful watcha say and who yer says it 'bout matey, or you'll end up fill-n in some-a-the bloody holes in the floorboards here. Get it?"

I starts to grin, then he turns to me.

"And you, yer little shit, watcha grin-n at? Get the bloody hell outa here!"

I quickly slip out to the comfort of the crowd in the old bar.

The old man's coming to, I think. Dad? Dad? Are you there Dad?

*

Gees, Dad. Me mind's all mixed up. Muck keeps jump-n into me head. I'm working illegally cos I'm not fifteen till Sunday, doing barman's work in the night cupboard, filling up the glasses on Mrs. Counter's tray for her customers in the Ladies Lounge. Mr. Counter will pay me good so I'm gunna celebrate tonight. Gunna have a few, then screw that little sheila I saw come in here with her old man last week.

Saved up and bought a new jacket and pants. Can hardly wait.

A bloke comes up.

"Gimme a flask of Corio," he says, better than scotch, you know."

"Yair, I wouldn't know, would I?" I grins. I reach up to the shelf and dust one down.

"Five and ten," I says. He gives me a ten bob note. I ring up the money and give him his change. He doesn't look at it. I look back up at the shelf. There's a flask of Gilbey's gin there. I'm gunna swipe it for tonight. I dust off all the bottles and rearrange them. Mr. Counter will be pleased. It might throw him off when he counts the stock. But he doesn't do it every day anyway.

*

The old man's breathing stops and starts again. I think he's gunna kick it bloody soon. I should try and find Mum. Me aunty said she went and stayed with her brother in Footscray. She's been gone for a while now. She was only gunna be there till she found a job. I dunno. I don't remember much about her to tell the truth. She never hardly spoke up. Was always in the kitchen cooking. I'd light the stove for her each morning. Then that was it. She'd cut me tomato sandwiches and I'd piss off to school. I s'pose she knows that Dad's gunna kick it pretty soon. Yair, she probably does. Don't think she'd care, though. Not that me Dad beat her up or anything. He wasn't that sort. He was, how they say over at the pub, a quiet drunk. Just sat on his stool in his corner and drank from the opening of the pub at nine till five minutes before it closed at six. Then he'd buy a flagon of plonk and take it home. And the next day he'd start all over again. Me Mum just stayed in the kitchen and cooked and didn't say nuthin. Except on Thursdays, she'd

run out-a money and ask him how she was gunna feed us. I was about twelve or thirteen then, I think. Somehow she always put something on the table. I was never hungry. She must-a been a good Mum, I s'pose. Then one day, she just wasn't there. She'd gone. Me Dad never told me nuthin. I had to scrounge for meself. Lived on bread-n-butter-n-vegemite. And good old Mr. Counter at the pub let me into the kitchen and the cook gave me something. So I did all right. Then one day me auntie showed up and tried to get me to go away with her. But I wouldn't. Me Dad just stood there, sipping his plonk. Looked at her, his big sister I think she was, like she was some a dingo that strayed into the kitchen.

Dad? Ya-in there, Dad? Are you all right? Take a deep breath, Dad. That'll make you feel better. Wouldja like a sip of plonk? I'm feeling round under his cot. There's always booze under there.

*

Hey Dad! 'memba that night we was round at Millie's? Remember her? I betch-ya do. She really liked you, I know. She liked me too! A bit too much, to tell the truth. I could-a shagged her, but you was there. Well, sort of. She tried to shag me, but I just couldn't do it with someone three times me age. Anyway, she was yours, wasn't she? Don't think you're hearing this, are you? And just as well. I told me mates at school all about that night. They couldn't believe it. You and Mr. Counter couldn't drive, remember? I wanted to drive cos you was both pissed. There was cars all down the street. Millie's place was right across from the police station. I couldn't believe that, could I? I already knew Millie from the pub. I'd go see her in the Snake Pit and all the women would go crazy over me. I loved that. Trouble was they was ugly as shit and too bloody old! Anyway, we gets in there—

Whatcha doin' Dad? Squeeze-n me fingers? So yer in there, are you? Oh, yair, that's right. She wanted you to be best man at her wedding! That was bloody funny. I left that out, didn't I. So I'm in the Ladies' Lounge and you walks in. And Millie latches on to ya— hey Dad, do I see a little smile on yer face? Are you coming good?— and she says, "I wantcha to be best man at me wedding tonight." And you looks at her and says, "I'd be honored, Millie me love." And she grabs yer arm and drags you over to her table.

"Ya see here?" she says, pointing to an old leather case, "it's me go-n-away case. Packed all ready for me honeymoon."

And-ya says, "Gees Millie, that's great."

And she says, "Don'tcha believe me? Here, look inside," and she opens the case and tips everything out!

Yair, Dad. She was really something wasn't she?

So we gets to her party that night. We goes in the door and you trips over this drunk passed out in the passage, and yer lying on yer back.

Millie calls out, "Hey! Whatcha doin' look-n up me dress?"

And you says, "Gimme a beer, Millie."

"It's me wedding night," she says, "and all you think of is beer!"

You struggles up — I think I helped you — and you gives her a peck on the cheek. Don't know how you could do it, Dad.

"Now can I get me beer?" you says.

"Somebody get me best man a beer," she yells, "and get me another brandy you pack-a-bastards!"

The smoke and the drunks is kill-n me. I grab meself a lemonade and take off out the back door. Then I'm in the back yard. It's a circus. One-a the cops from the station across the road's drive-n round and round the rotary clothes line on his police motorbike with a red-faced drunk sitting in the side car sing-n *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* and sucking on a bottle-a-wine.

Remember that Dad? And they ties the bike to the clothes line and the cop revs up the bike and makes it go faster and faster. Bloody crazy bastards, wasn't they? Then wham! The bike breaks free of the line and smashes into the fence. The silly buggers go flying over the fence. Was-ya there for that, Dad? I saw you, I think. Millie was hanging all over you, crying cos the bike had run over her veggie garden.

*

I got knocked out this day over at the pub. I was helping out in the beer cellar and one-a the extractors blew out-a the barrel and banged me right between the eyes. I was walking round in a daze with blood come-n down me face and someone called out for Mr. Counter. The cook cleaned me up then Mr. Counter brought me home. Mum opened the door and Mr. Counter handed me over and he hugged me Mum and said, "He'll be OK." And me Mum just looked at me and I went straight to me room and went to bed. And as I lay down I tried to convince meself that they were just being very friendly and me Mum was thanking him for take-n care of me. Then I heard the noises and so I knew that something was going on. Gees, Dad, didja know? Don't s'pose you cared anyway.

*

I did see you, Dad. I never let on to you, or anyone else, except me mates that is. Can you hear me this time Dad? Squeeze me hand, Dad? That's right. I know yer in there. So

I was there that time at Millies. I was standing right there in the bedroom doorway. You and Millie was so busy you took no notice. I dunno what I thought. It was a bloody awful sight, but it got me all worked up. The two of youze was on the bed. You tore off her dress. Youze was starkers. And Dad, I hate to say it, but you was so drunk, you was dribble-n all over her tits. And she was lolling around, her tongue hang-n out-a her mouth. Bloody awful sight, I tell-ya! When I told me mates they reckoned they was gunna throw up! Not me though, that's for sure. You know what I mean? I couldn't last it out to the end. It's me big regret. I never saw you finish her off. Bugger it! I just had to go to the toilet.

*

The ride home that night was pretty scary Dad, wasn't it? But then you probably can't remember. You and Mr. Counter was both drunk and I wanted to drive, and youze wouldn't let me cos I never had a license. We was going to get more beer, remember? They ran outa beer at Millie's party.

Mr. Counter drove all over the place. Dad, you urged him on, reckoned he was doing a great job! Gees, Dad. I was scared and I was huddled up in the back seat. Then there's this sudden swerve and screech and I looks up and there's this lamp post coming towards us. And Mr. Counter jerks the steering wheel and lets out this huge burp, and Dad you slide off the seat on to the floor. And there's a big jolt as the car hits the curb and bounces up on to the footpath. I feel like I'm floating in air and I see a shadow or something, arms flung up and then there's a thump and I sees this bloke's face hit against the windshield, then slide down as the car stops, and the body rolls off the car. Gees, Dad. It was really awful. You was swear-n and trying to kick open the door, and Mr. Counter, wouldja believe it, he was slumped over the steering wheel, snoring.

Someone peeked in. "Y'alright?" they says.

Dad, you was the most violent I ever saw you. You kicked open the door and fell out and said, "Where's the bloody beer?"

I climbed out-a the car, feeling alright. A bloke tried to help me and I shook him off. Then I saw the body slumped across the curb and the blood coming out-a his mouth. He was one of the regulars from the pub. And he was drunk too of course. Didja know him Dad? I think you must-a. What happened about that, Dad? Didja know? Was it Mr. Counter's fault? Should-a been. But I don't think anything happened to him cos of it, did it?

*

Gees Dad! 'member the smoked eels? That was a laugh, wasn't it? Come on Dad. This'll spark you up. The fish bloke comes into the bar. He's got this big parcel of fish wrapped up in *The Argus*.

"Gimme a beer and a Pimms Number One," he says.

"You can have a beer, but we don't serve fancy drinks in the bar. You gotta go to the Snake Pit for that," says the barman.

"The what?"

"Snake Pit. Ladies Lounge."

So I follows him to the Snake Pit. And he gets in there and pulls out a huge black eel from his parcel.

"Never seen a bloke with one as big as that," a bloke yells out.

The fish bloke wags it round the room go-n up to the women.

"Come on love, you scared of it or someth-n?"

This woman, she's half laughing, half scared to death, calls out, "Get that thing away, you filthy beast!"

And the fish bloke, he turns away, then turns back and he's got the oily black eel poking out-a his pants and he dances around the room, the women screaming.

"You filthy bastard! Get the fuck out-a here," they all yell.

Wasn't that a laugh Dad? Yair, I feel you squeezing me hand. You was there wasn'tcha? You left your favorite spot in the bar to go and see it all. Funny things always happened at the pub, didn't they? Didn't they Dad?

*

So Dad, you remember Shotgun Sally? Shotgun Sally Doolan? I betcha do. Bloody great hunk a flesh-n-fat she was. Remember? She comes into the Snake Pit and says, "I'm sick-a the three ins." 'memba Dad? You gotta stay with me. I'm talking to you. Can you hear me, Dad?

"The three ins," she says.

Remember? She was married to one of these two brothers and they all lived together. We all reckoned she might as well be married to them both. No one could figure out which one she was married to anyway. Yair, Dad. That's right, Dad. They was little blokes and she bossed them round, bashed them up at least once a week. One of them always had a black eye or something. Dunno why she was called "Shotgun" cos I never saw her with a shotgun. Was it cos she had a shotgun wedding? Dad? Wish you could talk Dad. Wish you could. Can-ya try? Yair, that's right. I saw yer tongue stick out a bit on yer lips. I know yer trying Dad. I know.

So what was the three ins, then, Dad? I saw the twitch, Dad. Corner of your mouth. I yer in hear-n me Dad. Yair. The three ins. She comes in and looks real sick and tired of

everything. And she orders her usual, that awful yella stuff, got egg in it, what was it called? That's right Advocaat. No wonder she was so big. Drinking those horrible things. And the barmen. They hated mixing them. She orders it and says, "I'm sick, I yam. I'm sick-a the three ins."

And Mr. Counter says to her, "And what the bloody hell's that?"

And she says, "Sick-a smokin' drinkin' and rootin'!"

Then she just quaffs down that yella stuff and grabs one of her blokes by the ear and says, "We're goin' home, ya little bugger. An' where's yer brother?"

They reckon she did-em both at once. Think that's true Dad? She couldn't, could she? I mean, I dunno much about it. Wish you could talk, Dad. I really do. We should-a talked like this before the grog gotcha, don'tcha think?

I gotta go for a piss. Be right back. Will you be OK? Think I'd better get the old doc again? Let go me hand, Dad. I won't be long. I'm gunna get a cuppa tea as well. You want something?

*

I know the quack can't do anything. He was bloody useless yesterday, wasn't he, Dad? He might be able to make you more comfortable. I phoned him. He says he's coming. Just a minute till I have a sip of me cuppa. Here, I'll give you this. Found the eye dropper. Filled it with a bit of whiskey so I can slip it in your mouth. There, that good? Ok, Ok, not too much. Yair, that's right. Calmed you down, didn't it? I gotch-yer hand again. You can still squeeze it, can'tcha?

When I was boiling the kettle I was thinking about Little Linda. Remember that time in the Snake Pit? Yair, who could forget it? I was picking up glasses and I runs into this thing standing at the bar cupboard where they got their drinks for

the Snake Pit. She's this short skinny little thing. Looks about the size of a kid in grade six except she's got this big swollen belly, pregnant like you wouldn't believe. And she's got this wrinkly face. Y'know Dad? And the wrinkles is full of dirt. Bloody awful, Dad! She's got these rimless glasses that's stuck together with sticky plaster. And there's this drooling kid that clings to her old floral dress. Youze all called her Little Linda cos she was real little compared to her dad who was Bigshit Bill, and everyone was scared of him.

So Mr. Counter says to her, "What can I do for you, Linda me luv?"

And she laughs and says, "Don't come at that bloody luv business with me! Gimme two whiskeys and a beer, and make it quick. I feel bloody crook."

"Shouldn't you be in the hospital?" says Mr. Counter.

"Go to the shit-house, you bastard!" she cackles.

"How long to go, Lin?"

"Shit, I dunno! The way I feel, it could be any minute. It's a bloody nuisance. The sooner the bloody better, that's what I say." She gets her grog and off she goes to the Snake Pit.

I'm back in the bar collecting glasses and we hears these terrible screams coming from the Snake Pit. I remember you, Dad, sitting on your favorite stool in the corner, staring at your beer. The screams even made you look up, and you says, "What the bloody hell's that?"

So I runs 'round to the Snake Pit and there's Bigshit Bill standing at the door, slap-n and bang-n anyone that comes near the place. Mr. Counter comes up and yells, "Hey! Bigshit. Whatcha think ya do-n?"

"Keep out of it Eddie, or you'll get it too. I warn youze all. No bastard's go-n in there while me daughter's like that."

"Like what? Oh bloody hell! You don't mean she's dropping one right in there, do-ya?"

And she has the baby right on that greasy lino in the Snake Pit. Couldja believe it Dad? I sneaked in under Bigshit's arms, and there she was! And I saw it all! Wish I hadn't. It was bloody awful! I could-a thrown up. Nearly did.

And then, you 'member this Dad? The next day, she shows up like nuthin happened. She's got the grubby little kid hanging on her skirt. She asks for a beer and two whiskeys. She looks just the same, 'cept she's a bit thinner of course, bloody haggard and bloody filthy. And she's got this old pram.

"The new-n?" asks Mr. Counter.

"Yair. Struth! Am I glad I'm carry-n the little bugger in the pram and not in me guts! Don't just stand there gawk-n! Get me bloody drinks! I'm bloody crook!"

She downs the whiskeys and takes her beer and pram and kid to the Snake Pit. I follows her in. The women in there, they all goes up and gawks at the baby and it gets lifted out and passed round. It's making a feeble cry. I dunno, Dad. I felt sorry for it, I really did. But whatcha gunna do?

Dad? You OK? The whiskey help you? Yair, that's right. A bit of the old dog, aye? Yer smiling aren'tcha?

*

Gees, Dad. I gotta keep talking. I can't just sit here saying nuthin. Remember that New Year's Eve when the corpse got lost? After the six o'clock bell went and all the customers was gone, and the barmen was having an after-hours drinking session with Mr. Counter? There was this loud banging on the front door. Grecko the bouncer opens it. And that big round copper they call Dummy pushes past him half

waddling, half running down the passage, his fat gut jiggling up and down over his belt.

"Quick, Eddie," he calls, "ring for an ambulance, quick!"

"Why, what's the bloody matter, been an accident?"

"No, worse than that. There's a corpse out in the car park! Dead as a doornail he is! I'll have a whiskey while you're ringing the ambulance if you don't mind."

"You don't want an ambulance, you want a hearse!"

"No jokes you bastards, this is serious. Now ring for that ambulance before I run youze all in!"

"Sure, sure. Hey, Grecko, ring for an ambulance will you? Dummy, you sure he's dead?"

"Of course. He's not breathing, I tell-ya. And he's as white as a bloody ghost! And I reckon he's go-n stiff already! Give-us another whiskey, make it double."

"Hey, Dummy, will I call the police as well?" jokes one of the blokes and Dummy spills some of the whiskey as his hand shakes bringing the glass up to his big bloody mouth.

"We better go out and have a look," somebody says.

"There's no need," says Dummy, "I've seen it. Youze better stay away. You never know. Might be foul play! I think I'll have a beer now if you don't mind. This sort of thing's a bit hard on the nerves you know."

Course, Dummy never pays for nuthin. He sips his beer and licks the foam from his lips and everyone starts quaffing it down waiting for the ambulance.

"And how's yer wife, constable?" asks Mr. Counter.

"Huh, how should I know. Came home late the other night from the police boys club and just because I smelt of a bit of

grog, she slapped me face and pissed off! I'll have another beer if you don't mind." Dummy holds out his glass. His eyes is all watery.

"Christ! She hasn't run out again?"

"Yair, but I'm get-n used to it now."

"This must be about the fourth time in six months, mustn't it?"

"Yair, but get-n used to it. Get-n to like it really. Married men don't get as much freedom as I do with her out of the way."

"By gees, you know, I never thought of it like that."

"I'll have another beer, if you don't mind," says Dummy and he dabs his watery eyes with a hanky.

"The ambulance should be here any minute."

There's a bang on the front door and Grecko let's in the ambulance bloke. He's a little bloke all dressed in a white dust coat like me fourth grade teacher used to wear.

"Er...you got a corpse here I think?"

"That's what our constable here reports," Mr. Counter says. He's trying real hard not to grin. "It's out in the car park."

"That's right," says Dummy being all official, "come on, and I'll show you."

Big Dummy leads the way, the ambulance man at his elbow, and the rest-v-us tag along.

"How do you know it was a corpse? I mean, how did you know it was dead?" asks the ambulance bloke.

"Now really sir. He's stiffer-n a board. I've been a cop long enough to know whether a bloke's dead or not," says

Dummy all put out. "It's just around here, beneath the cypress tree there. You can see his boot stick-n out just under that lower branch."

The ambulance bloke runs forward, and the rest-v-us push Dummy and he stumbles.

"Here, behind here!" cries Dummy.

It was very dark, Dad, don'tcha 'memba? And we was all pushing forward to see what was what.

Dummy yells at us, "Orlright! Orlright! Keep back there! Wait till I turn on my torch."

We was all sniggering and joking and then Dummy flicks the torch on and then we sees it! A shoe, a crumpled up tie, and a bit of vomit that Dummy put his hand in when we pushed him forward.

"Ahem! Are you sure it was here?" asks the ambulance bloke and he's got this smirk on his face.

"It was here, I tell you! Somebody must have swiped it!"

"Now, really Dummy, who'd want to swipe a spew covered corpse?"

"But I tell you. The bloody corpse was dead!"

"And how bloody else could a corpse be?"

Dummy gets upset. "Cut the funny jokes. This is serious."

"I'll say it is," snarls the ambulance bloke. "It looks like you've got us out here on a wild goose chase, and wasted the little money we have. Somebody really sick and dying might have needed us, right now. I might have to report this, constable."

"But I tell-ya—"

Things didn't look too good. Then Mr. Counter steps in to save the day. Gees, what a good bloke Mr. Counter is, Dad. Don'tcha think? But I don't even have to ask you, Dad, do I? He's been your best mate forever.

"Well it looks to me," says Mr. Counter, "that this corpse was probably well and truly flaked with too much grog. Then it got up and walked away. Really flaked alkie often seem as though they're dead you know."

"Yes, that's right Eddie. That's what happened," gabbles Dummy. "He's probably still around."

"Well all I want to know is who's go-n-ter pay the ambulance fee? I'm not go-n away from here with nuthin."

Poor bloody Dummy. He looks around us all, and we're sniggering and nudging each other. Then Mr. Counter takes Dummy aside and whispers to him, but we can hear it all.

"Look Dummy. There's still plenty of drunks stagger-n round the place. All we have to do is grab one, sock him one if he makes too much noise, and chuck him in the ambulance. And he pays the fee."

"Do you think it would work?"

"Of course! Come on." So Mr. Counter tells us to spread out and look for the corpse, and he goes off with Dummy and they pretty soon find a drunk staggering round and Mr. Counter says, "Here's one Dummy, and cos you're bigger-n me, I'll grab him from behind and when he swings his arms, you step up to him, tell him he's drunk and disorderly, then thump him one. Got it?"

"Well—"

"Good. Let's go."

So they grabs the bloke and he never knew what hit him, and they stuck him on a stretcher and chucked him in the

ambulance.

Dummy calls out to the ambulance bloke, "We found him flaked out in the gutter. You better be careful with him. Drunks get bloody wild when they wake up you know."

The ambulance bloke closes up the ambulance and locks it tight. "Rightee-O," he says, "let's go inside and do the paperwork."

So we all goes back in the pub, and Mr. Counter let's them all have a few more beers until the ambulance driver gets tipsy, and then Dummy informs everyone that it's past closing time and they all have to leave or he'll book Mr. Counter for trading after hours!

*

Are you getting sick-a-me Dad? I'm doing all the talking I know and I must be repeating myself. I wish you could talk to me Dad. There's prob'ly lots I've left out. What about the other yarn about Dummy and the Preacher. Gees, they was a funny couple-a cops, wasn't they Dad?

It was that night when I seen one of the biggest fist fights ever. Grecko the bouncer shoved them outside the pub, and they was throwing punches at each other on the footpath. And anyone that walked by got clobbered. So Mr. Counter finally called the cops. And they came in force. Gees, what a sight that was!

There was Dummy on his bike, and another one on a motor-bike and a couple-a more in a car. And they was really big blokes so it took them no time to break up the brawl. Dummy mostly did it wielding his old truncheon. He just stood in the middle of the bunch of brawlers, smiling all the while, and waiting till one got close, then tapped him hard on the back of the head, and out they'd go. There was six of

them out to it on the footpath in no time. And the other brawlers, when they saw it, got the hell out.

So then the crowd starts to heckle the cops but two police wagons show up and they all runs back in the bar and pretend like nuthin happened. And the near dead brawlers was thrown into the wagon with a heave-ho like they was sacks of wheat. They fill one wagon and it drives off, and then the driver of the empty wagon strolls into the bar and tells the last of the drinkers that it's closing time and they better get out or he'll put them into his wagon.

This cop was one of Dummy's mates and everyone called him The Preacher. He called himself an 'individualist' whatever that was s'posed to mean. I dunno Dad. I couldn't understand a word he said, could you? He always had a bible and read bits out to blokes he reckoned was too drunk. And he'd even give lectures in his deep preacher's voice, (remember that Dad?) about staying on the straight-n-narrow. Something about duty to God, Queen, Country and the law, and being a good citizen. I dunno. And he'd walk round the bar, slapping drinkers on the back, sometimes even buy-n someone a beer. And if a bloke wanted to buy him one back, he'd say:

"My friend, it's against the law to drink in uniform, but seeing as I personally don't hold with interpreting the law to its most infinite letter, without taking into account the individual, I shall accept. It's necessary for a policeman to be on good terms with the populace, you know."

Then he'd take off his cap so he wouldn't be in full uniform. And he'd gulp down his beer and slap his hand on the counter and announce, "Well, I must away and do my duty."

And remember the time, Dad, when he was in the bar having a few with a mate, his cap sitting on the bar counter,

and they boozed away for an hour or more, then he tells his mate he's had enough and it's time to quit and go home to his missus. So his mate goes out and drives off, and the Preacher pops out on his motorbike and books him for drunk driving!

Another night, the Preacher comes in and as the last customers was leaving the bar, he raises his right hand above his head and says the benediction, or something like it.

"The peace of God be with you," he says.

Remember that Dad? You was sitting on your stool, and you called out 'Amen' and then he and Dummy goes round to the night cupboard for a few free drinks. And the Preacher says, "Now, Dummy, my boy, how's the wife? Is she with you, or is she with you not?"

"She came back yesterday. I'll have another beer if you don't mind," he says to Mr. Counter.

"It is with great pleasure that I am pleased to hear it," says the Preacher. "You know, I am glad that you are present here tonight Dummy. I am going to need assistance, so I am asking you for help."

"What help?"

"You know Fred's in hospital after being stabbed by that bloke down at the Queen's Head pub?"

"Yair."

"He is getting much better now that he is almost well, and being thirsty he requires something of the kind that you and I are drinking tonight. I consider it our duty as fellow policemen to see that this state of affairs is corrected."

"So you think—"

"Do not interrupt. It is my personal and individual opinion that the far too officious staff of the hospital will not allow said refreshments on said premises. We shall thus be required to put into action a plan for conveying same. Agreed?"

"Well, I suppose so, but—"

"Good, then it is done. We'll do it tonight. I have already cased the joint, as some of our clients say, and know exactly what we must do."

"But Preacher, my wife's home tonight, I promised her I'd go straight home. You know she's not there too often."

"Shame on you constable. Do you not recognize your duty when it is pointed out to you? The plan will not operate without you. It is beholden for you to come."

"I'll have another beer, if you don't mind," says Dummy and he makes this big sigh and his eyes go all watery. Gees, Dad, poor old Dummy, the poor bugger.

And then Mr. Counter says, "Inspector—"

And the Preacher goes all upperty. "I am not an inspector, I am a first constable. We are the ones who do all the hard work."

"Oh, sorry, Reverend. I was just going to suggest that I come with you to give you a hand, then Dummy could go home to his missus."

"Well, of that I am unsure. It should be a member of the constabulary. But I suppose it could be done. I am not an unreasonable man. You are fit, I take it?"

"Certainly. Never been bloody better."

So the Preacher stands up straight, like he's the bloody king.

"Good. Then it is done," he says, "so shall it be. And in the name of the Father, the Lord be with you. Quickly we must fortify ourselves for the venture. I'll have a double whiskey as well as the beer this time."

Mr. Counter — what a good bloke he is, Dad — fills his glass, and Dummy pushes his forward too, and the Preacher gives him a really shitty look and says, "Young man, you have had enough. Run along home to your wife immediately. You have an individual responsibility to her."

Gees, Dad, the two of them, they was a bloody funny couple, wasn't they? This big lanky Preacher, over six feet tall, and Dummy shorter and round like a football. And the Preacher looks down on him over his pointy nose that just about touches his chin. And Dummy doesn't say a word, he just kind-a nods at Mr. Counter, and plods away.

"Well now Mr. Counter, are we ready?" asks the Preacher.

"Just a couple more grogs for the road. What grog do you want to take to your mate? I'll go get it while you fortify yourself."

"Oh. Let me see. Nothing much. What about, I should consider, a bottle of whiskey, a bottle of brandy, a bottle of rum, and let me see... yes, a bottle of port thrown in for good luck. Port is an excellent invalid's drink. It used to be drunk in the year of our Lord, you know."

I was wondering Dad, what the bloody hell did he mean? What's the year of our Lord? They never taught that to me at C of E boys club. Shouldn't he have said what number year or something? Anyway, you was there when they left, wasn'tcha? It was the time when you was still doing a few odd jobs for Mr. Counter.

They goes out, right? And Mr. Counter told me later, they got into the police wagon and sped off to the hospital.

"Well, what's your plan Reverend?" asks Mr. Counter.

"My good sir. It is that I have tried to convey these goods past the nurses at the entrance without success, and so I have been unable to do so. I have therefore surveyed the situation with the utmost scrutiny that a man in my position and individual responsibility is able to do, and have decided that we must climb up a large creeper that leads to the second floor window where our beloved comrade lies. That is why I asked you to bring the string bag to carry the grog."

"Sounds fair enough. But don't you think it's a bit early to do that yet? I mean, it's only eight o'clock. Something like this ought to be done much later when there's no one around."

The Preacher looks at him for a moment and says, "You are correct. Good thinking. I like the way you plan the method and execution of your attack. We shall delay some hours. I have also just realized that this parcel of alcohol is too heavy for a long climb up to the second floor. Therefore I suggest to you that you open the whiskey. We shall pull up here while I call the station and tell them I'm on patrol."

So they knock over the bottle of whiskey and then the Preacher advises the utmost caution and suggests a further delay until the very early hours of the morning. And then he opens the bottle of port.

"Now reverend!" says Mr. Counter, cos he's worried if he drinks the port he'll pass out, "we should keep the port for a special occasion. You should have it after a meal or something."

"Again you impress me, Mr. Counter. So it shall be. We'll catch a meal to have with the port."

"We'll what?"

"We'll go rabbiting my boy. The spotlight on my police wagon is very excellent for spotlight shooting. And I have a rifle, a shotgun and my police revolver if needed. Away! Away we shall go!"

The Preacher speeds off to the paddocks just outside of Bannockburn. He turns off to a dirt track, and then into a paddock full of rabbit burrows and mounds of dirt. And every bump they hits, the Preacher calls out, "May the Lord have mercy on our souls!" And Mr. Counter says, "Amen."

They took turns driving and shooting. Mr. Counter told me that they was really both too drunk to drive and they had no idea where they was going and they couldn't hold the spotlight still, let alone the gun, so they kept missing the bloody rabbits, even with a shotgun!

Then there's this huge thump.

"Shit! We've hit a bloody kangaroo!" cries Mr. Counter.

"Rubbish, sir! We have merely run into a tree."

"Thank bloody Christ for that!"

"I am pleased to hear you thank the Lord for small mercies, but really this must mean the end of our festivities here. We must make for the hospital immediately. Away!"

So they drive off, the police wagon all bashed in, and get back to town and they're get-n close to the hospital when the Preacher stops the wagon right near a crossroads. They sit there until a car comes by and doesn't properly stop for the stop sign. The Preacher darts out and smashes into the poor buggar. He gives him a lecture on individual responsibility and tells him he better have good insurance cos he'll have to pay for the extensive damage to the police wagon. He gives the bloke a ticket as well and then he and Mr. Counter drive off to the hospital.

"Right, Mr. Counter. Up you go! Poor old Fred's waiting for his grog." The Preacher points to the creeper running up the wall.

"Who, me?"

"Well, of course. You could not expect me to do it. It is against the law, and I'm a uniformed policeman."

"Bugger you. I'm not go-n up there. I'll fall and bloody kill myself. Besides, someone might see me."

"Who, the police?"

"Ha! Bloody Ha! Very funny Reverend. But I'm not bloody go-n-up. And that's final."

"As an official member of the Victorian Police force, I hereby order you to do it."

"And I order you to go and get stuffed!"

"Really, Mr. Counter. You are using indecent language. I've a good mind to book you. But I'll let you off only this once. Now, run along and do your job."

"Sir, I'm afraid I must refuse." Mr. Counter goes to get out of the wagon, but he hears a clicking noise as the Preacher grips his arm. The Preacher has handcuffed him to the steering wheel!

"Now, sir, I must ask you to do as I tell you."

"Look, you stupid bastard, I'm not going up that bloody wall for you or anyone else. So get stuffed!"

"Then that settles it. I'll have to take you down to the station for questioning. I am charging you with being drunk and disorderly, and for using indecent language to a police officer."

"Ha! Ha! What a bloody joker!"

"I am an officer of the law. I do not play games with law enforcement."

And the Preacher drives off, Mr. Counter still cuffed to the steering wheel, and they pull up at the police station, and the Preacher takes him in and locks him up! Next morning a cop comes and lets him out, and to this day, Dad, so Mr. Counter says, he's never heard anything more about it and the Preacher's never said anything to him. Like it never happened!

*

Dad, I'm back here with you. Had to go for a piss. Here, gimme your hand again. Yair, that's better, isn't it? Gees, Dad. While I was peeing I was thinking all the more about your mates at the pub. There was some real characters, wasn't there Dad? That's what made it such a bloody good place for you, wasn't it?

Remember the wooden leg? Gees, that was funny. I laughed about that for days. This bloody old hag, well to me she was old, about forty I s'pose. She comes into the old bar and has this big black eye. You was sitting in your usual spot on the stool in the corner. You looks up from your beer — something you didn't do much — and you says, "Shit, Bella! What the bloody hell happened to you?"

I stop collecting glasses and there she is, right beside me. She's got this hair that looks like it was rinsed in mud. Her face is all red and wrinkled up. You'd reckon it'd slipped down into her neck, that's how bloody awful it was. And her left eye was all red and runny, and her right eye was hidden behind a swollen lump of blue flesh. And she's standing there, a bloody orange ribbon tied round her head, and she's got on this dirty yellow dress that looks like the wind from Corio Bay blew it on her like a piece of newspaper slapped against a tree.

"Two beers quick," she says.

Dad, you remember her, don'tcha? She picked blokes up in the bar, blokes who looked like they had some dough. You gotta remember her. She was the only woman I ever saw come into the old bar.

"There you are Bella. Now what the bloody hell happened?" says Mr. Counter.

Bella takes a few long sips of beer, licks her lips, and says, "Shit, I picked a good one this time!"

"Yair?"

"He threw 'is bloody leg at me. That's what 'e did!"

"He what?"

"His wooden leg. 'e took it orf an' threw it at me! Got me fair in the bloody eye 'ere. See it?"

Gees, we could see it all right, Dad, couldn't we? You could hardly miss it. Then she tells us the story. She picked up this bloke with the wooden leg cos she felt sorry for him, and as well, he'd won a hundred quid on the races that day. And she reckoned she could manage a bloke with a wooden leg and not get bashed up like the others did to her all the time. So she helped him spend his winnings on a bit of grog, then took him home for tea.

How'dja like that, Dad. How'dja like to go home with her? You're squeezing me hand aren'tcha? Yair, bloody awful, I'd say. I'd rather go off by meself wouldn't you? Gees, Dad, don't know if you heard me. I shouldn't be saying stuff like that to you, should I? I mean, it's the way me and me mates talk. Hope I didn't embarrass you. I feel a bit embarrassed myself. I dunno what I'm saying, Dad. But I'm scared I mightn't be able to talk to you again, so I'm just go-n at it,

you know? I'm sorry. I just feel like I have to talk and talk. You can understand, can'tcha?

Anyway, they gets home and they drinks more booze and they goes off to bed. And she says to him, "Take orf yer bloody leg, it'll get in the way."

And he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't take it off.

"The dirty bastard!" she says, "it was good enough for me to take me pants orf, so it was good enough for 'im to take orf 'is bloody leg!"

He says no or something and Bella says she kept nagging away at him to take it off and then she kind-a fell asleep. Next thing she knows, she's half asleep, half awake and feels this tickling, burning on her arse. He's trying to wake her up by burning her with his cigarette!

"Yair, I'll believe it but thousands wouldn't," says Mr. Counter.

And next thing, Bella says, "Yair well, take a look! I got no panties on!"

She turns around and lifts her dress over her head! And we all sees the proof! The bloke had burnt his initials on her fat cheeks! Imagine that, Dad. A fifteen year old kid like me, seeing that! Gees, we was all in stitches, wasn't we?

She gets him finally to take his leg off and he does it alright and throws it at her and it hits her in the eye. So she grabs it and beats the shit out-a him and then smashes it up. And without his leg he can't do nuthin to her. She orders him out-a the house, and the last she saw he was hopping down the street using the front fences to prop himself up.

And then she plonks the leg on the bar counter, all patched up with sticky tape, and tells Mr. Counter to give it to the poor bloke when he comes in next. And the leg's still

there, hanging on the wall just below the picture of the Queen.

I think I hear the doctor at the door, Dad. I better go see. Let go me hand, Dad. You're gunna be OK, Dad. I'll be back with the quack. I'll be here. You're gunna be OK. I'll be with you, Dad. That's right, let go. Gees, good yer still strong enough to hold me tight. I gotta let the quack in. Let go, Dad. I'll be right back.

*

Feeling better Dad? Those deep breaths. That means you're feeling better, right? You're gunna be OK, Dad. That's what the doctor said. He gave you an injection of something. Said it would make you feel more comfortable. That right Dad? Are you feeling a bit better? Here, grab me hand again. Yair, that's right. Can you squeeze me hand so I know you can hear me? Gees, Dad. I think I felt a little squeeze. Can't you do a bit better? Yair, that's OK. I know yer in there, don't I Dad?

Remember Swampy, Dad? Remember him? He was one-a-the funniest blokes, wasn't he? He always reminded me of Robert Menzies, ya-know? The prime minister? It was those big bushy eye brows, that's what it was. And he had a roll of fat under his chin, didn't he? And his voice, it was really deep and gruff.

Mr. Counter was funny that day when the Preacher came in with a new bloke. You was there then, weren'tcha? Yair, course you were. You was always there, weren'tcha Dad?

They walks in and Mr. Counter winks at the Preacher, and says, "Ah, look. I'm having a bit of trouble with one of the blokes in the bar. He's cadging money off the other customers. He's getting to be a bit of a bloody nuisance."

The new bloke looks 'round and sees Swampy, standing like he always does, on one leg, the other sort-a twisted around it. And of course, he looks like a tramp, bloody old clothes, rags mostly, torn and filthy like you wouldn't believe.

"That him?" asks the new cop.

"Yair, but don't stare at him. He might get violent."

"No problem." He turns to the Preacher and says, "Sir, shall I make an arrest? Take him in for vagrancy?"

"Go ahead my son, let's see you make your first arrest," says the Preacher.

So the young cop comes up beside Swampy's nose-wipe-n elbow, grabs his arm and says, "I'm afraid, mate, I'll have to take you in for vagrancy unless you can show that you have some visible means of support."

"Aye? Haw! Haw! Haw!" sniggers Swampy. "Wail, oi don't know whiver oi've got anyfing on me or not. Haw! Haw!"

"Then I'll have to ask you to come along."

"Now, wait a minute cuntstabool," says Swampy, as he wipes his nose with his left arm and feels inside his pockets with the other.

"Come on, I've given you enough time!" says the young cop.

"Haw! Haw! Haw! 'ere's wot oive been look-n for."

Swampy pulls out a fist full a dirty notes made up a fivers and tenners. The young bloke's eyes popped out, didn't they, Dad?

"But where did you, where did you, get this?"

"Haw! Haw! Oi robbed a bank! Haw! Haw! Haw!" says Swampy, and he pulls out a soiled piece of paper, and the copper sees it's a check for a thousand quid, his latest wool check. The whole bar was in stitches, wasn't it Dad? Gees it was funny. And Mr. Counter feels sorry for the young copper and pours him and the Preacher a beer on the house.

*

Gees, Dad. I never saw anyone like Swampy. Mr. Counter said he was a typical Irishman, with a name like Swampy Donnegan. What'd he mean by that, Dad? He was such a bloody big bloke, and all those whiskers, the whatchacallit, tooth brush moustache, bits of it burnt from lighting his cigars. And those long hairs growing outa his nose, and his hair never combed and his face all oily and grey cos he never washed and said he was proud of it. And his clothes looked like he slept in them, and he was proud of that too. Mr. Counter said he'd seen him cleaned and dressed only twice, and that was for funerals. He'd suddenly disappear for a few days then show up in the pub dressed in tails, complete with bow tie, dress-shirt, top hat and walking stick. And he'd strut into the bar, ignore his usual drinking mates, and drink no beer, only scotch.

"I wouldn't be bothered with that commoner's drink," he'd chuckle with a la-de-da accent.

Remember how he talked, Dad? It was like outa his nose, kind-a like a donkey, and really slow. Took him forever to say something. And all the while he talked, he stroked his nose with his finger or wiped it with his sleeve, and he'd stand on one leg, rub-n the other up and down the back a his calf.

*

Dad, gotta tell you this one. I know you seen it. I musta been about fourteen at the time, doing me job for Mr. Counter collecting all the empty glasses. I was gathering

them on the old bar counter when I heard this loud dog-like barking. It was bloody Swampy.

"Woof! Woof! Woof!" he yelps.

"Baa! Baa! Baa!" A little crumpled up bloke answers from over the other side-a-the bar.

"Woof! Ruff! Ruff! Woof! Haw! Haw!" barks Swampy.

"G'ar'n yer bloody old dag-arsed ewe!"

"Haw! Yer bloody mongrel dog-catcher!"

So this crumpled up bloke, his head sunk into his shoulders, goes on bleating like a sheep, and he's wearing this tweed double breasted coat with the collar turned up over his ears. And get this Dad, when he talks, his tongue shoots out like a lizard's and licks the tip of his nose. You must-a seen him Dad. He was the dog catcher and he and Swampy was always fighting. You 'member what happened, Dad? Yair, gees it was funny.

Yair, that's right, Dad. I see yer trying to smile.

One day, Swampy shows up at the pub riding his old draft horse, followed by his mongrel dog that he was always boasting was the best shepherd dog in Victoria. So he hitches his horse to the bike rack and gets stuck into the booze the rest of the afternoon. His dog follows him into the bar and sits by the door. Mr. Counter tells him, as he does every time, that the health inspector said no dogs allowed in the bar. So Swampy orders the dog to go home. Instead, the dog wags its tail and goes over to Mr. Counter and licks his hand. Swampy curls his leg round the other, wipes his nose on his sleeve and yells at the dog some more and it just wags its tail harder. Mr. Counter was getting sick-a-the dog slobbering on his hand, so he walks away, mumbling to Swampy something about he'll call the dog catcher. Swampy swallows his beer, slams the glass down and then gives his

dog such a kick in the ribs it runs yelping straight out the door, its tail between its legs, like they say.

About an hour later, the dog catcher comes into the bar and stands at Swampy's elbow. He swills a beer down then nudges Swampy in the ribs and says, "Aye, y'own a mongrel dog with a black spot over its eye, cross between a collie and a foxy?"

"Yair, so what?"

"I just picked 'im up."

"Aye? Haw! Wot? Yer picked up me bloody dawg?"

"Yair."

"You bloody! Haw! Bloody dawg-catch-n bastard!"

"What's the matter with you? I'm do-n the right bloody thing by tell-n ya."

"Haw! Shit! Who ya think yar, yer bloody crossbred shit! Where's me bloody dawg? Aye? Aye?"

"Givvus another beer," says the catcher to the barman.

"Well? Where's me bloody dawg?"

"Well," sniffs the catcher, as he licks the tip of his nose, "he's in at the council shelta. I took 'im in 'alf 'our 'go. 'ad no tag on 'im. Poor bloody dog was starve-n anyway."

"Shit! Haw! Haw!" cries Swampy as he gulps his beer, curls one leg round the other, "you cn just go-n get 'im back fer me."

"Get 'im yer bloody self."

"You get 'im. You took 'im!"

"He's your dog, you get 'im!"

"You bloody Haw! Haw! shit-house thief!"

"I told yer, I done me djuty. You cn do wot ya bloody like."

The catcher walks round the other side-a-the bar and ignores Swampy who's swear-n at him and make-n all kinds of weird noises.

Then after another few beers, Swampy goes quiet. He says he's going for a piss, and goes out to the car park to the dog catcher's cart and grabs the dogs from the back and locks them in the cabin of the truck.

The dog catcher knows something's going on, so he runs out. Swampy's nowhere in sight cos he's gone for a piss. The catcher opens the door of his truck, and the dogs leap out, barking and biting and then they run in all directions. By this time, Swampy's back in the bar, boozing on. Then a bloke comes in and says, "Hey, Swampy. Yer 'orse is gone."

Swampy lets go this huge donkey-like noise and he staggers out the pub. "Me bloody 'orse!" he croaks.

His dog's sitting on its haunches, whining, tied to the bike rack where his horse was.

"That fawk-n shit of a dog catcher! He's pinched me bloody 'orse!"

Just then the dog cart pulls up, his horse peering out-a the back-a-the truck. The catcher struts around the truck, twitching and licking his nose.

"This your 'orse?"

"Yair. Wot you bloody doin' wiv it, you ferk'n' mongrel bastard dog catcher?"

"It was shit-n on the footpath. Can't allow that, 'gainst 'ealth regewlations!"

"I want 'im back!"

"You can't 'ave 'im!"

"Haw! Gimme me 'orse!"

"Get stuffed!" The catcher's tongue darts out.

"Hey, Bessy!" drawls Swampy to his horse, "the bastard's locked yer in 'is truck. Why don'tcha kick yer way out luv?"

"You'll 'ave to come an' collect 'er at the shelta."

"Like buggery I will!"

Swampy picks up a stick and pokes Bessy and she's not too happy. "Come on Bessy luv! You cn make it!"

He pokes her some more, and she moves away but doesn't kick or anything. So he slides his arm through the rails and jabs the stick hard up her rear end. Poor old Bessy neighs as hard as she can, jumps and kicks, shaking the truck and everything until the truck gate pops open and she scrambles out and gallops away up the Melbourne road as fast as she can go with Swampy chasing her.

Ever since that day, Swampy's always barked at the catcher whenever he came in to the bar, and the catcher always bleated back.

*

I'm on a roll, now Dad. It's hard to tell just one Swampy story. There's so many, aren't there? Swampy's mates was always kidding him about getting married and having girl friends. Mr. Counter said they'd sent letters. pretending they was Swampy, to the lonely hearts column in *The Advertiser*. But Swampy reckoned he'd had enough of women cos of his sister. She locked him out if he came home drunk and he had to sleep in the barn. She even had a pair of binoculars to spy on him when his truck was at the pub.

Anyway, if you can believe it, and I know you can, Dad, cos you was always there, Swampy had a mate who smelled even more-n he did. Remember him Dad? The slaughter

yards bloke. One night he kidded Swampy about his being single:

"Gar'n Swampy, you won't get married cos you aint got wot's needed to do it!"

"Haw! Haw!" chuckled Swampy, "wot ya mean, aint got wot's needed?"

"You got nuthin. A horse proberbly bit it orf."

"Haw! Haw! Haw! Ya bastard. Haw! I got one of the biggest y'ever seen!"

"Gar'n, Swampy, yer kid-n. If yer've got one, it's proberly too small!"

"Yair? Who'er youze ter talk? Betcha ain't got much neither."

"Bigger-n yours, I bet."

"Bull shit. Bet mine's bigger-n yours."

Swampy looks him up-n-down and reckons he can win cos the slaughterman's short-n-stocky, whereas he's over six feet tall and he's got long legs-n-fingers. Is that right, Dad? Is that true? That's how Mr. Counter told it.

"Betcha?"

"Yair. Betcha five beers."

"Yer sure?" asks the slaughterer. He's got this big smirk on his face.

"Yair, c'mon, who's got a ruler?"

The barman produces a ruler. Swampy licks his moustache and rubs his calf with his toe.

"Right-cha bastard, whip it out! Haw! Haw!" chuckles Swampy.

"You first. You made the bet."

"Awright, ya bastard, if yer scared."

So Swampy unbuttons his fly, his fingers goes in then flip his whatchacallit out holding it tween his thumb and finger. He stretches it out as far as he can.

"There y'are, eight inches. Beat that!"

"Shit! Not bad Swampy! But yer should see mine."

The slaughterer reaches into his kit bag and pulls out a blood-stained newspaper parcel.

"Well? Haw! Haw! C'mon, let's see it. How long?"

The slaughterer undoes his fly and then, holding his parcel down near the place, suddenly flops out a long, thick, blood-stained black thing that was a horse's prick!

Gees, Dad, thank goodness I wasn't there to see that. You must-a seen it. I can't imagine it. Scares me to death, Dad.

Anyway, the slaughterer says, "I win. Mine's longer-n yours!"

Swampy stares speechless then makes those deep donkey noises and wipes his nose on his sleeve.

"Ya fawk-n bastard!"

All the blokes in the bar laugh and come up and slap Swampy on the back for being a good sport. He buys the five beers for his mate, and they throw the bloody awful piece of meat round the bar. The last they saw of it was someone taking it into the Ladies Lounge.

*

Here's another one that Mr. Counter told me Dad. Are you doing OK, Dad? Are you getting sick-a me talk-n? I dunno what else I can do. I'm keep-n you going I know I am. And

I'm gunna keep doing it. I'm not gunna leave you, Dad. I'm not.

This is the one when Swampy ran for the local council election. One afternoon, his slaughterer mate stood at the main door of the new bar hand-n out how-to-vote cards to the blokes when they came into the pub after work. The ticket read:

VOTE FOR ONE OF YOUR OWN BLOKES

DONNEGAN, S.

Hope, A.

DON'T VOTE FOR A BLOODY DOPE

The night before the election, Mr. Counter was really annoyed cos Swampy stood up on the bar counter at half past five when everyone's buying up their booze, and delivered his election speech. Nobody listened. They was drinking and talking of course. Mr. Counter says he was the only one listening and it went something like this:

"Er...Haw! Haw! Gennlemen! Gennle...Haw! men! Oi yam take-n' this opportchunity to tellyer that if youze wanna be looked after, youze better vote...Haw!Haw! for me!"

He waves his arm, licks his moustache, wipes his nose on his sleeve. "I will representcha on the council an' make sure...Haw! youze gets looked after."

"For Chris' sake, geddown, Swampy!" pleads Mr. Counter.

"All piss'n wind, Donnegan, you dirty bastard!"

"Gennlemen! I promise you—"

"Promise us you'll 'ave a wash, then we'll vote for yer!"

Lots-a blokes laugh and they clinks their glasses with each other.

"Oi promise that youze-ll be able to hitch yer 'orse where youze like...Haw! Haw! Haw! And—"

"Why don'tcha hitch yer strides up instead?"

The bar's in stitches. Swampy wipes his nose again and crosses his legs while he scratches himself in the you-know-where.

Dad, he would-a stayed up there till six except Mr. Counter had enough. He grabbed the drip tray under the beer tap and poured the dregs down Swampy's pants! Swampy laughed his donkey laugh, and then shouted the bar. "Free beer for all youze blokes!" he yelled and stumbled down from the bar.

Mr. Counter said that Swampy got 288 votes and the other bloke got about a thousand. Swampy said he was glad he didn't win cos he'd have to shave for every council meeting!

*

What's that Dad? You're sick-a Swampy yarns? Yair, I don't blame you. Gees, Dad, whatcha trying to do? Let go me hand? OK, there you go. Are you cummin good, Dad are you? Gees, your hand, you're trying to move it up to your face! You wanna scratch your cheek? Is that what you wanna do, Dad? Here, I'll take your hand and rub it against your cheek. How's that? Better? Itchy, are you? There you go. I'm give-n you a good scratch. Dunno what's made you itchy. There's no mozzies in here, is there?

Reminds me of Skeeter. Remember him Dad?

They called him Skeeter cos he buzzed round you like a mosquito. You had to be careful or he'd bite you for a few quid and a lot more. Me and Skeeter was good mates, Dad, didja know that, Dad? I was his errand boy, I s'pose you'd call it. He bragged that he'd only ever worked four days in

his life, Dad, couldja believe that? Yair, he reckoned he worked just long enough to slip over and do his back in and go on workers comp, whatever that is, Dad, I dunno. But he was always spending dough, Dad. So he must-a done all right. He was a regular like you, Dad. He'd come in to the pub every morning at nine, soon as it opened, and drink till twelve then he'd take home a pie for lunch and have a snooze and be back at four and drink till close-n at six. And on Saturday nights he'd buy a half dozen bottles-a-beer and a bottle of plonk to tide him over the Sunday.

He was always on the take, though, wasn't he Dad? Remember the raffle he used to run? Mr. Counter wasn't too keen about it cos he said it was against the law, but Skeeter talked him in to it, saying it was for charity. He was a smooth talker, was Skeeter. He could talk anyone into anything, couldn't he Dad? I bet you he even bit you for a few quid, eh? And the prizes was pretty good. He started out raffling chickens and ducks at sixpence a ticket, and I sold them for him while I done me rounds picking up glasses. This worked great until a bloke that won the raffle claimed the chook as his own! Skeeter'd been pinching them from blokes' chicken coops!

But that never stopped him, Dad, did it? He raffled radios and record players. Course, everyone knew he was pinch-n-em, but nobody cared as long as it wasn't their own stuff that was pinched. They was wrong, wasn't they? Mr. Counter noticed that the same stuff kept being raffled. Turned out that the raffles was drawn in secret, and that Skeeter picked out a few mates to always win and for a small cut, they'd give their prize back to him each week! How's that for a scam Dad? Gees, Dad. I thought he was the smartest bloke I ever met, y'know? And he always paid me pretty good. So I had no complaints. But Mr. Counter put his foot down and wouldn't let him do nuthin more in the pub. Didn't stop him coming up with other scams, though.

Dad. Didja know about the milkie and the postie? I betcha heard about it. Gees, it was smart, Dad. Y'know Skeeter was the bookie, don'tcher? Yair, I know, you never played the ponies. Booze was yer only vice y'always said. I know.

Skeeter started taking bets in the bar, but Mr. Counter was scared the cops would take away his liquor license, so he made Skeeter set himself up behind the back fence, just near the piss-house. Yair, Dad, I took a bit of a risk of getting caught myself, but you didn't know anything about it, I think. I kept nit for Skeeter, running bets to him from blokes in the bar. So when a bloke had a good win, he'd give me a few extra bob. Pretty good! I made lots-a dough!

Skeeter was so clever, Dad. Y'know he never wrote anything down, kept all the bets in his head. He reckoned if there was nuthin written down then the cops couldn't get any evidence to do him in. And it was true, too. The cops knew what he was doing and besides some-a-them made a few quid off him themselves. You know what cops is like, don'tcher Dad? A cop shows up and says to Skeeter, "I'll 'ave a quid straight out on the favorite in the last-race." Course, he wouldn't hand over any dough. If the horse lost, then nuthin happened, but if it won, the cop comes round the back-a-the fence to pick up the winnings.

Then those other bloody cops comes down from Melbourne. The flying squad they called them. They was a pack-a bastards, Dad, wasn't they though? They'd show up every month and demand a fifty quid fine from Skeeter, and if he didn't pay up, they'd make like they was gunna take him in on some trumped up charge. He paid them for a while, but yer know what cops is like. They wanted more and more and pretty soon poor Skeeter told them to get stuffed, and took off like a dingo across the paddock, chewing up the betting tickets and swallow-n-em as he ran. By the time they caught him there was no evidence, but that didn't stop

them. Naaa. They charged him with loitering, creating a public nuisance, abusing a police officer and resisting arrest. And in court they told all sorts a terrible lies about him, how he beats his wife, threatened them with a knife and stuff like that, so the JP gave him thirty days in the clink. That didn't worry Skeeter one bit. He could make even the lousiest deal seem good. He said the only thing he missed in jail was his regular few beers, but otherwise he didn't have to work, and what's more he got free meals.

Jail gave Skeeter time to think up another even better scam. When he came out, he went straight back to his old drinking routine at the pub and he got friendly with the postie and milkie. Mr. Counter kept a close eye on him but never saw him take any bets. But he had lots-a dough and Mr. Counter was sure that something was going on. And Dad, you know, it was! Even you probably didn't know about this. I did cos I still worked for Skeeter every now and again.

Skeeter got the milkie to leave betting cards — place cards they called them — when he delivered their milk in the morning, along with any money they won with the previous bet. Then later the postie would collect the card and the money that was bet. He never got caught all the time I was working for him. Only trouble was I lost a lot-a dough cos I wasn't running bets for him.

*

Dad, I'm gunna have to take a snooze. Been up with you all day and all night, you know. I don't mind. But I just can't stay awake any more. And I dunno if you're in there still. Are you there? I'm just gunna sit back here in the old lounge chair. And gees, Dad, have to tell-ya I'm running out-a stuff to talk about. It's bloody hard y'know. Gees, wish you could talk, Dad. Really I do. There's sweat or something on your forehead Dad. I'll get a damp cloth and pat you down. Dunno if it means anything. Are you hot or something? There's that

white stuff getting stuck on your lips. Don't worry. I'll wet a cloth and wipe it off.

*

I'm sort-a snoozing in the old lounge chair, and there's this dream — Dad's breathing fast now — there's this girl, I can't get her out-a me mind. Can't be a dream, though. Cos I'm not asleep, least I don't think so. I can't get her out-a me mind now I've stopped talking to Dad. You know the one. We went to the movies. I mean, she was, well I told you, hotter-n you could imagine. I just, I mean, it can't be OK me thinking like this. It was a couple-a years ago after all and I'm sitting here beside me Dad watching him die. And I'm getting all worked up like I'm gunna have to run to the toilet. Gees, I could do it right here. And I look at me Dad lying there. The little huffs and puffs remind me he's not dead yet and here I am go-n at it. She's driving me crazy and she's not even here! And it was years ago! I mean, it can't be right, can it? Dad? Dad! Oh! Dad!

*

I dunno what's going on Dad. You didn't always hit the booze, didja? I can remember you taking me to Fords, to the office you called it, wasn't it? I was really little, I know that. Mum was happier then I s'pose, or am I just making it up? I dunno any more. Don't s'pose it matters. Gees, Dad. Howdja end up over at the pub?

Ok. I'll stop asking you questions. I know it's not fair, cos I really know the answers, don't I? The way everyone looks at me when I go down to the shops or go over to the pub to pick up your booze. They even tell me I should get out-a here and go live with me auntie. What kinda life would that be? I still go to school. Don't wag it much, except to earn a few bob on a good day at the pub. They tell me you're an alky. The grog gotcha and you lost your job at Fords. So

what? None-a their business. Mr. Counter took you on as a barman, they say. But I don't remember that. Never started going over there till I was a lot older. You was well and truly gone by then. I mean, you got too sick to do the bar work. You did odd jobs, and then Mr. Counter put his foot down and wouldn't give you work any more. Something about when you was doing the painting he caughtcha drinking the metho. That's what burnt all your lips, Dad. That's why they're all red and swollen. You know that? Course you do. You couldn't help it, I know. We all know that. Can't blame you for that, can we? The bloody grog gotcha and there's nuthin anybody could do about it. If I was older I might have been able to getcha off it. I s'pose Mum tried, and couldn't and that's why she left. Wish I knew what she was like. Can't remember much of her at all. Dad, me mouth's all dry. I'm getting sleepy again. I'm gunna make a cuppa tea. Don't go away, now, will you. Stay there. Wish you could talk Dad. I do really.

*

Dad's breathing in fits-n-starts. He's gunna die any minute. Dad, I can't hold your hand right now. Got a cuppa in me hands. While I was waiting for the kettle to boil I was thinking about the Salvoes, Dad. I dunno about them. They tried to help you, didn't they? That Captain Billington, he was always nagging you. I never liked him. He tried to grab me once. I kicked him in the shins and he never tried it again. I never toldja of course.

I put me cuppa down and grab Dad's hand in both mine.

Remember Captain Billington, Dad?

I feel a tiny squeeze from his hand. Or maybe I imagined it. He's still in there, I reckon. But not for long.

Dad, I'm gunna leave you for just a little while. It's Saturday night. The Salvoes will be at the pub in full swing,

revving up *Onward Christian Soldiers*, your favorite, Dad. I remember that New Years Eve when you stood next to Billington and sang it so loud, and I couldn't believe you could do it. I never heard you speak in a loud voice ever, let alone sing. I never thought you had it in you. I'm going over there, Dad. I'll be back real quick, you won't know I was gone.

I let his hand go, and I run out quick, not looking back or anything. He'll still be there when I get back. I just had to get outa there. Dunno why. I get these things into me head and I have to do them.

*

These Salvoes, they're a bunch-a shits. They squeeze their way through the blokes in the bar, jingling their little box, selling their newspaper, putting on this fake smile, like they was Jesus himself. And they all look the same. Got these pale faces and bright red cheeks. And after they've done their rounds collecting money, they goes outside and start singing hymns, trying to drown out the abuse they get from the drunks.

"I wouldn't give you bloody mob a bloody penny!"

"My Jesus loves you sir."

"Yer know why? Yer bloody hypocrites stopped ten o'clock close-n that's why. Now yer take-n money off us that wanted it. Bastards!"

"Jesus loves you, my friend." The Salvo puts on this big smile like Jesus loves him more than the bloody drunk.

"Huh. Wouldn't be bothered with yer bull shit. Yer don't even know whatcha preach-n, do yer? Aye? What's God like more 'bout youze than me? Aye? Why don't he stop wars, aye?"

"Sir, join us in song, worship the Lord—"

"You don't bloody know, do ya? All you bloody mob's interested in's collect-n money to waste on those shit-house sound-n instruments of yours. "

"We..we..well, sir, why don't you come down to our citadel tomorrow and I'll try to, to, help you."

"Just wot I bloody thought. All-ya wanna do is c'llect money. Can't answer me questions, can-ya? Ya care as much for bloody Jesus as me arse!"

The blokes start sniggering and crowding round cos they think the drunk's gunna belt him one. Then up comes the biggest hypocrite of-em-all, Captain Billington his bloody self. He's waving his short stubby arms, and his navy Salvoes coat is too small to button up round his fat beer belly. And he keeps coughing and his watery eyes looks like they're gunna pop out each time he coughs. He rubs his beer belly against the drunk.

"Who the bloody hell are you?!" snarls the drunk.

"I, sir, am Captain Billington, Salvation Army's biggest supporter. Also the most broad minded. And you, sir, are a blasphemous bastard."

"Whadja say?"

"I said that you're a blasphemous bastard."

"Didya say yer broad minded?"

"Bloody yes."

"Then why don'tcha have a beer?"

"I have bloody already bought myself and you one."

"Shit! Ya mean y'actchally drink?"

"Only on special occasions, and this is one of them."

"Well, bottoms up mate and I'll buy yer one."

A bloke yells out, "A bloody Salvo drink-n! Didn't think I'd ever see the day. Bloody hypocrite!"

"Sir," says Billington as he slurps his beer, "first you say bloody we are hypocrites because we bloody don't drink, then you say we are bloody hypocrites when we does bloody drink. Ya don't know what you fer— ahem! Pardon, bloody are talking about."

"Christ!"

"Blasphemous bastard!"

The bloke was gunna hit him, but right then Billington plops down on the ground.

"Shit! He's out to it!" A few of the blokes grab him under the arms and sit him down on the curb at the edge of the Melb-n road, and he stays asleep sitting there.

Then comes the band.

"Onward Christchun sol...BOOM...djer-ers! BOOM March...UMPAH..ing BOOM to war!"

There's these two girls, shit, I imagine them out-a their uniforms, pretty nice, banging tambourines, a half pissed bloke playing the accordion, an a little bloke humping the tuba. And there's this other kid, about my age, stands up real straight and belts out something on a cornet. And there's this drunk stands up on a beer box and starts conducting. All of a sudden, Captain Billington, rears up and taps the conductor on the shoulder then pushes him off the box.

"My dear friends," he says, "it is with sadness and joy that I pass God's divine message to you this lovely evening—"

"Givvus anuver song! Anuver song!"

"Gentlemen! Brethren!"

"Yair! Anuver bloody song. Lesh sing the sholdjers one again!"

"Silence! Shut up you bastards!"

"Onward Christchun sol...BOOM...djer-ers! BOOM March...UMPAH..ing BOOM to war!"

That's as far as Billington got. He slipped off the box and sat on the ground, looking down at his bare belly that had popped out over his belt. The band plays on, and Billington staggers up and starts to cross the road. I run to grab him, cos there's cars coming. And I help him cross the road and point him away from me house and he goes off up the street. I'm going back to me Dad. Hope he's all right.

*

Dad, I'm gunna get the quack in again. I think you've kicked it. I can't see you breathing and your grip is kind of stiff. Your hand's still warm though. And now you've started to bloody smell. Dunno what it is. It's not piss-n-shit. So I dunno what to think. I'm going to get you another blanket to keep you warm. Dad I dunno what to do next. Can't you just keep going a bit longer? I'll get you a brandy. You always used to get that for Mum when she had her fainting spells. Back in a jiff.

*

I'm in the new bar. It's about half past five, I think, maybe later. I dunno. Haven't got a watch. And there's no clock on the bar wall. Everyone's watching the new TV Mr. Counter put up. The Olympic games is on. Mr. Counter isn't too pleased with it but he can't take it down. "They watch the TV and don't drink their beer," he complains.

I start picking up glasses and bringing them to the bar. It's hard to get through the crush. Everyone's packed in to see the TV. It's the first TV any of us has seen. One of the barmen sees me and says, "G'dday. How's your old man?"

"He's alright," I lie.

I'm in a kind of daze. I don't know what to do except what I'm doing, picking up glasses. I stay there until the end, till the 6 o'clock bell and the bar's empty. I go to leave with them all, but Mr. Counter grabs me and says, "Is your old man OK? I didn't think I'd see you here tonight. I heard he was pretty bad. On his last legs, they say."

I turn and look at him right in the face. "He's good," I say. "I gotta get back to him. You wanna come see him?"

"Gees, I'd like to young fella, but you know what it's like around here this time of night."

"Yair, OK. Might seeya tomorrow if he's doing all right."

"Son, if there's anything I can do, just say so. Your dad was a great friend of mine and I want to make sure you do OK too."

"I know. Mr. Counter. I know. Thank you. I gotta go now."

I was going to cry, that's why I had to get going quick. But I didn't go straight home. I walked around to the back fence, where Skeeter used to take bets. And I had a piss in the old out-house, and I walked out into the bare paddock, scratching myself on those bloody thistles. I looked to the horizon beyond the burnt fields, shimmering in the red glow of the summer sun. I wondered what was over there, remembering when I was a kid, about twelve I was, when I took off into this paddock and reckoned I was going to go away and never come back. But I was too scared even to go as far as the next paddock. My hands was in me pockets. I kept walking. And walking.

*

I must have gone a long way. By the time I got back home, I saw an ambulance and people going in and out of the house. I kept away and waited till the ambulance drove off and there was nobody left going in and out. And I went into the house, and my Dad was gone. I hope they were good to you, Dad, I said, looking at his empty cot. And I went to me bedroom and I flopped down on me bed and I grabbed my pillow and I hugged it. And I slept.

*

I'm standing in the middle of the Melb-n Road, facing Melbourne. There's this big truck coming at me. I'm trying to get out of the way, but I can't. I'm rooted to the spot. I'm waving my arms, yelling at the top of my voice. But it just keeps coming at me. And just as it hits me, I wake up, all sweaty and gasping for breath. It's me nightmare I've had for as long as I can remember. I'd call out in the middle of the night. "It's come-n at me Dad! It's come-n at me!" And me Dad would be there shaking me. "Wake up! Wake up! Yer-aven-yer nightmare!" And I'd wake up and I'd turn over and go back to sleep. I must have been real little though. Me Dad wasn't into the booze then.

I rolled out of bed with me pillow and drifted out to me Dad's cot in the sleep-out and I plopped down in the lounge chair. I don't know how long I sat there, dreaming, wondering what I was gunna do. Then I got up and went across to the pub. I couldn't think of anything else to do. And I collected glasses for Mr. Counter and I laughed and joked with the customers and I pretended nothing had happened.

*

There was a big send-off for Dad. I knew there would be. Mr. Counter told me the funeral was set for three o'clock and

most of the mourners took the day off work so they could pay their respects, as they put it. Me auntie had tried to get me to go with her and get all dressed up and sit in a black car and I wouldn't talk to her and I wouldn't even look at her. I hid away in the pub. It was the best place I knew to get away from her. She wouldn't dare come into the bar. All those men would scare the shit out of her.

Lots-a blokes started to show up at the pub at half past nine cos they reckoned they needed an early start. And I was amazed to see lots of them dressed up in dark suits and ties. Shows just how much respect they had for dear old Dad. And I hung around, picking up glasses like I always did, listening to the blokes talk about him.

"Giddy mate. Bad luck, wasn't it?"

"Cd see it cummin' all the bloody way, though, don'tcha think?"

"Yair. God! I tried to tell 'im. I tried."

"He did it to 'is bloody self."

"By Chris' 'e drank some bloody grog the last couple-a years!"

"I'm buggered if I know why he did 'imself in. The grog just got 'im I spose."

"Thank Christ the grog hasn't got me like that. It must-a been someth-n in 'is blood."

"Yair, too much blood in his alcohol stream."

"That's for sure."

"By shit, in the early days, he used to tell some bloody good jokes. Wonder 'ow he remembered 'em all?"

"Well, he 'aint remembering 'em now, that's for sure, unless he's tell-n 'em to Peter at the pearly gates."

"Yer blasphemous bastard."

"Tell-n 'em to Peter? More like the devil, a bloke that's drunk as much grog as he did."

"Hey, didja hear the one about Gabriel an' is 'orn?"

Then Mr. Counter banged a glass on the old bar counter and stood up on a chair.

"Mates— " he said.

"Geddown ya mug!"

"Friends!" he cried, "listen you bastards!"

"Calls us bastards. Who the bloody 'ell's he think he is? A bloody son of a virgin?"

"Shut up, fuckyers. I'm gonna make a speech. He was a good bloke!"

Someone shouted, "Give 'im a go!" And I couldn't believe it, everyone went real silent. You got to understand. The bar was always loud, always. So the silence was, like I've heard them say, deafening. You know, I think at that very moment, I kind-a grew up. I was, like, thinking to meself — myself — now here's something important that's just happened. I felt I kind of understood who I was, if you see what I mean. I felt like one of these blokes. I was looking at them all, Mr. Counter especially, and I was wondering what made them be here, what was their homes like, what was they trying to do in their lives. The blokes around me, they're holding their glasses, like there's going to be a toast or something. They're all looking like I never saw before. The silence, it's spooky. A restless quiet I'd call it. They're kind-a looking into space, except there's none in the bar. They're looking like they're trying to make out the shimmer of a rider in the distance like you see in the movies of the wild, wild west or something. Gees, I dunno what's happening to me. I give Mr.

Counter a look. He sees me out-a the corner of his eyes. I know he thinks I'm gunna — going to — cry or something. And I think I'm gunna too. My face is starting to flinch, I'm holding back a gush of tears. It's agony. It's been quiet for so long, or seems like it. And just as I was about to burst into tears, Mr. Counter saves me and he gives a loud cough and starts his speech.

"Mates. It is now nearly three o'clock and the funeral is about to start. It's too late for us to get there now, but I bloody know it for a fact our ol' mate wouldn't 'ave wanted us buggerisin' round 'is grave - he'd be more'n bloody 'appy knowin' we was in 'ere 'av'n a few beers on 'is beyarf. He was a great mate-a-mine, youze know. He never did a bad turn to anyone and by Christ he could drink."

"Here! Here!"

"By gees he could."

"He had a fuck'n' good sense a yumor and could take a joke. He was a bloody good bloke you know, and he never said a crook thing 'bout anyone."

"Yer bloody well said that before, Eddie."

"Yair. Finish it up, and let's get back to the bloody drinkin'. He was a good bloke, now he's six foot under pushin' up daisies, so let's ferget about it an 'ave a few beers."

"Yair. 'ere, 'ere."

"Okay fellers. Well, 'ere's to 'im an' the next round's on me."

There I was, standing back, in agony, swallowing my tears. And to my consternation my mind started thinking for itself. I mean, I started thinking, what am I doing here? All these buggers in the bar, who cares about them? And why should they care about me? Course, right then they didn't.

Loud cheers filled the bar, and it was quickly back to serious drinking. "The old pub's resumed normality," I said to myself, then immediately said, "Did I say that?" And I felt pleasantly lost in the noisy din, the arguments, the smell of stale breath and sweating bodies, the warm and stuffy atmosphere, the jostling shoulders and elbows, the clinking of glasses and the sweet sound of the cash register bell.

And outside, the gravel on the footpath crunches under busy feet, the dirty cream paint keeps peeling from the bricks, the grey dust clings to the sticky window sills, and the magpies still sit on the wires above, chortling away. The air's full of the noises of life, the cars on the busy Melbourne road, the throbbing noise of the factory across the street, the shouts of workers as they make their way to the pub. And next door to my own place the houses have been demolished, replaced by builders' sheds. Workmen are busy laying new foundations, and there's spectators gathered around, cos they're going to build a new pub, the biggest for a hundred miles around, one of which we'll be so proud.

*

I got drunk. Someone came to get me into the car that followed the hearse, that pulled up outside of the pub, I think. I should-na done it. Some bloke came up to me and said, "Here young fella, a beer will help you get over it. Sorry about yer old man." So I looked at him. I was after all old enough, seventeen, to have a few drinks, I thought. And I'd mucked around before. Wasn't like I didn't know what was going on. So I had one beer and then I had a few more, and I wasn't sure what was happening to me. I started to gather up the glasses as usual, and somebody grabbed my arm and said the hearse was here and asked didn't I want to say good-bye to me old man. So I went out with this bloke and I saw my auntie sitting in the car behind the hearse and I just stopped dead in my tracks and shook my arm free.

"I wanna stay with me Dad. He's not there, he's in the bar with his mates."

"But it's your father's funeral."

"His funeral's inside here. You're just getting rid of him at the cemetery. I'm not going." I turned around and went back in the bar and I collected more glasses and put them on the counter. And Mr. Counter came over to me and he touched me lightly on the shoulder and said, "We know how you feel, mate. Here, have another beer."